

Iliad 24: divine power and human responsibility

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Some of our readers will remember Tim Whitmarsh's piece on Hermes in *Iliad* book 24 from our last issue. Here is another take on that powerful and unsettling final book, considering the role of the gods and particularly of Zeus in mediating human conflict and grief. You might like to read it alongside the article on women in the *Iliad* on page 10.

The final book of the *Iliad* brings together many of the themes of the poem, and draws them to a surprising close. At the heart of this book is the meeting between Achilles and Priam, king of Troy, whose son the Greek hero has killed in vengeance for the death of his friend, Patroclus. Priam and Achilles converse in Achilles' quarters, in a divinely orchestrated meeting, in which Achilles agrees to return the body of Hector, and also encourages Priam to eat with him, before sleeping nearby. For a short while the divisions caused by the war are put to one side, and the two men acknowledge in one another the human relationships which transcend the suffering and anger which have dominated the events of the poem.

The opening lines of the book mark the end of the funeral games for Patroclus, and a return to continued emotional turmoil for Achilles, who is unable to sleep, turning from side to side after the death of his friend. Achilles' continued abuse of Hector's body, which he is dragging around Patroclus' tomb, has angered the gods, in particular Apollo, who is indignant that a prince who has loyally made sacrifices should find his body treated in this way. As an argument breaks out between Hera and Apollo, Zeus finds himself adjudicating between them. He sends Iris down to Achilles' mother Thetis to summon her to Olympus so that she may hear his message and then speak to Achilles, whilst also sending Hermes to Priam to guide him to gather ransom and travel to the Greek camp. In his message to Achilles, Zeus notes that he especially of all the gods is angered by Achilles' actions: Achilles' lack of respect of Hector's body must come to an end. The importance of respecting the body is also underlined by Apollo's preservation of the body with a golden aegis, which ensures that Achilles' efforts are in vain. Here, then, Achilles has been thwarted: the

divine will is that Hector's body is to be respected.

Your mother calling – it's a message from Zeus

When Thetis comes to speak to Achilles, a striking feature of the dialogue is the speed with which Achilles agrees to the instructions from the gods. Thetis presents herself first as his mother, addressing Achilles as 'my child' (*Il.* 24.127), and asks him why he is not eating or sleeping. She reminds him that death is very close to him. When we next meet Achilles, as Priam enters his quarters, he has been eating, and, of course, will later ask that Priam both eat with him and sleep nearby. Thetis' motherly concerns are addressed in moments, despite the great difficulties outlined in the opening lines of the book. Thetis then states that she has come as the messenger of Zeus (*Il.* 24.133), with an emphatic 'but' (*ἀλλ'*) introducing this portion of the speech. The gods are in conflict with one another, and Zeus in particular is angered by Achilles' actions: he must accept a ransom and release the body. Despite all the raging up to this point, Achilles immediately agrees. In a terse response, he simply states that he will return the body to whosoever brings ransom, if that is what the Olympian himself wants (*Il.* 24.139–40). The response could hardly have been shorter, and it is in marked contrast to the anger and rage that has built up since the death of Patroclus and to the long speeches delivered in book 9. Achilles immediately accepts the will of Zeus.

The involvement of Zeus in these final stages of the poem continues with the sending of Iris to Priam to encourage him to gather ransom and go to Achilles. Again, the response of Priam is instant: he orders his sons to prepare a wagon, whilst

he hurries off to speak to his wife about the plan. He asks her what she thinks about the messenger from Zeus: her response is highly rational, outlining the dangers involved, but he will not be put off: he has decided that he will go, and so he begins to gather the ransom which he will exchange for Hector's body. On the suggestion of Hecabe, he asks for a sign from Zeus to confirm that he will be able to go to Achilles, a sign which duly arrives as an eagle flies past on the right-hand side. Here again the attention of Zeus is notable: the poet tells that he heard, and responded immediately (*Il.* 24.314–15). Zeus has a strong and direct interest in what is happening, not least because the other gods are also keenly involved.

Priam: a father's journey

Priam begins his journey, accompanied at first by his children. Zeus sends Hermes to meet the elderly king, and to support him on his way. At first Priam is frightened by the appearance of a young man who claims to be part of Achilles' entourage, but he soon puts the king's mind at rest and guides him into the presence of Achilles. Hermes' ability to bring the king straight through to Achilles' quarters, lifting with ease the bolt which it took three men (other than Achilles) to lift, marks Priam's arrival as special. Hermes finally reveals his identity to Priam (*Il.* 24.460ff.), before departing. In the Homeric poems more widely, only 'special' people can see the gods: Odysseus, for example, in the *Odyssey* or Achilles in the *Iliad*, can do so, but this is unusual. Hermes' revelation of himself to Priam marks the occasion and the king out as special: Hermes even states that he must not be seen at this point by Achilles. The divine has truly favoured the king, and has brought him to this point. Moreover, Hermes' parting words to Priam are significant: he tells him to supplicate Achilles by taking hold of his knees, and begging him for the sake of his father, mother, and child (*Il.* 24.466–7). This is, of course, what Priam does: Achilles reminds Priam of his son, whilst Priam reminds Achilles of his father. At the heart of this dialogue is the idea of family, with a clear emphasis on father-

son relationships.

This theme of the family has come directly from the gods, and Priam's appeal to it ensures the success of the meeting that follows. Later in the book, we are also reminded by the poet of Hector's role in the family in Troy: of his care for Andromache and their child Astyanax, of the love that his mother, Hecabe, had for him as her dearest son, and of the gentleness with which he treated Helen, who was hated by almost everyone else in the city. In this final triad of speeches we are led to recall the events of book 6, in which Hector returned to the city and was asked by these same three women not to leave: first Hecabe, then Helen appeal to him, before Andromache makes a climactic and impassioned appeal to her husband not to leave the city. Hector was now both her mother and her father, because they had been killed by Achilles (*Il.* 6.413ff.). The scene ends with the touching vision of Hector removing his helmet to smile at the young Astyanax, who had been so afraid of his father's military appearance. Hector then leaves the city, as Andromache prepares the bath to which he will not return. The final triad of speeches in *Iliad* 24 recall the events of book 6, and they underline the importance of the theme of family in the *Iliad*. Hermes' emphasis on this theme also reflects the divine will that it should be respected.

The meeting between Priam and Achilles has thus required a considerable divine effort to ensure that it will succeed. Both parties are aware of the dangers, not only from Achilles' own temper, but also from the potential for the other Greek leaders to find out about the meeting and bring it to a swift conclusion. Indeed, it is this fear that leads Hermes to return to Priam after he has slept for a short while in Achilles' quarters, and to guide him back to Troy (*Il.* 24.687–8). The circumstances under which they meet serve to emphasise further the significance of this divinely orchestrated event. Homer also includes some significant details which show the reader that this is an event of considerable significance. Priam chooses not only to supplicate Achilles, but also to kiss the hands which have killed his dearest son (*Il.* 24.578–9), a theme to which Priam returns in his own speech to Achilles (*Il.* 24.506). The epithet used to describe Achilles' hands, 'child-killing' is also used in the *Iliad* to describe Hector: yet again, a poignant reminder of the significance of this action.

Divided by war, united in humanity

Both Achilles and Priam find themselves grieving for the loss of a loved one. Both refuse to eat, and both have been unable to sleep. By the end of this meeting,

however, these two obstacles will both have been overcome: Achilles eats, on the instructions of his mother, whilst Priam is persuaded by Achilles, who uses the example of Niobe's response to the loss of her children, that he should eat and put aside his grief. The striking element of this book, therefore, is not simply the return of Hector's body, and the respect with which Achilles treats Priam's request, but also the emotional and psychological change which has occurred under the direction of the gods. The grief which has been eating away at these two men is laid to rest, if only for a brief time, and a happier way of living is suggested. Achilles agrees to stop the fighting so that the funeral rites for Hector may take place: Priam responds that the fighting will continue on the twelfth day, *if we must* (*Il.* 24.667). There is, therefore, in this final book a suggestion that war, after all, is not necessary, and that the conflicts which arise between men are not part of the natural or divine order of things.

In trying to encourage Priam to move away from his grief, Achilles tells the story about Zeus' jars of good and evil, to illustrate that there is no use in endless grieving (*Il.* 24.524ff.). On one level, this story seems to suggest that the gods allocate fate to men at will, and that there is no apparent explanation of different people's fates, other than Zeus' desire to allocate as he sees fit. Achilles moves on to comment on the fates of both Priam and his own father, Peleus, who will have to suffer at home without a son to protect him, just as Priam will now have to suffer without Hector. The noticeable feature of the suffering of Priam and Peleus is that they both suffer because of the actions of their sons. It may appear that Zeus is allocating things to them which are good and evil, but the responsibility for these actions seems to rest firmly with the humans. The appearance is that such things are allocated randomly, but a moment of reflection from the reader shows that the situation is a little different.

Moral gods?

In the *Odyssey*, Zeus suggests, early on in the poem, that men are far too quick to blame the gods for the evils which they face (*Od.* 1.32ff.). In the closing sections of the *Iliad* there may be a similar message: that the gods are keen to uphold what is good among men, and to hold back the forces of war. Indeed, concern for this causes a great dispute among them, which angers even Zeus himself. However, it can also take a divine effort to ensure that men are in harmony with one another. The gods may live an untroubled life on Olympus, disturbed periodically by events among men, but they also wish to ensure that men can see beyond their differences: they take great trouble to ensure that Priam and

Achilles meet, and lay aside the conflict of war for a short while. For men to live in a manner approaching the tranquillity of the gods, they will have to respect the will of the divine: just like Achilles and Priam, they will have to make considerable efforts to overcome anger and fear, but they will also have the support of the divine in aiming to do so.

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